

D'var Torah

By Rabbi Michael Bernstein

This week, in the boardroom of a synagogue on the Upper East Side of New York, the Committee of Jewish Laws and Standards of the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly will deliberate on the question of whether or not to find a place for gays and lesbians within the framework of Jewish law. This is a decision that will have a great impact on the lives of many of my friends, colleagues and potential colleagues who have committed themselves to a life within this framework and know that being gay is an inextricable part of who they are. It may seem counterintuitive to look for support in the Torah, source of the verses on which the biblical prohibition against homosexuality has been based. Still, the Torah can be a powerful guide when it comes to the experience of wrestling with one's identity and trying to find holiness in the midst of lifelong journeys and alienation. Jacob provides a great example. His whole childhood he struggled to find the significance of his particular birthright. To get his blessing he even had to take on the identity of his brother Esau. In the midst of forced deception and imposed exile, however, Jacob also has encounters that help him connect to his better nature.

It is fitting that the week of the Law Committee ruling is situated between the reading of two visions of Holiness. This Shabbat we read of Jacob's dream of a ladder, "*mutzav artza vrosho magia hashamayma* / poised in the ground with its head in the clouds." This is a revelation of rootedness. A promise that in the midst of his wanderings Jacob will always be able to find a place to call home. Jacob awakes suddenly from his sleep and declares "*achen yesh adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati* / Behold G-d is in this Place and I did not know it." In fact, Jacob names this place of angelic experience, Beth El, House of G-d. A place to find the Divine Presence.

Next week, Jacob will have a more troubling encounter. Foreshadowing and overshadowed by his lifelong feud with his brother Esau, Jacob finds himself "*yvateir lvado v'yaavek eesh imo ad alot hashachar* / left alone, and a man wrestling with him until the break of dawn." This time, Jacob's revelation forces him to confront himself and challenges the place where he would plant his foot. To win a blessing from this place, Jacob must force his wrestling companion to show his face. And in fact Jacob names the place Peniel, the Face of G-d, for there he finds the Holy One present in both his wrestling with the Unknown and his facing the one he knows all too well.

I think that between these two visions is a powerful story of the importance of finding holiness in the familiar and rooted as well as the need to challenge ourselves to be conscious of the face



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of the other person. The story of Jacob's ladder inspires us to find places to call home, to be at home with ourselves, to recognize the holiness in the places we call home.

The depiction of Jacob's wrestling with an angel, inspires us to look ourselves and others in the face, to not be complacent about who we are and who we can be, and that blessings are worth fighting for. I pray that the discussions of the Law Committee are guided by both the legacy of wrestling with what we face and the inspiration to find holiness in this place.

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